

Yosemite National Park

Replace South Fork Bridge

National Park Service
U.S. Department of the Interior



Background

Constructed in 1931, the South Fork Bridge was the main access across the South Fork of the Merced River in Wawona. In 1997, it was closed to vehicle traffic due to damage sustained in the 1997 flood. A temporary bypass bridge was installed approximately 100 feet upstream to accommodate traffic until a replacement bridge is constructed.

South Fork Bridge in Wawona

Why is the bridge significant?

The South Fork Bridge spans the South Fork of the Merced Wild and Scenic River and is located on the Wawona Road (Highway 41) within the Wawona developed area. Approximately one third of Yosemite's visitors travel to the park via Highway 41 and Wawona Road, crossing the South Fork on the South Fork Bridge. As such, the South Fork Bridge is an important component of Yosemite National Park's transportation infrastructure.

The bridge was constructed in 1931 and reconstructed in 1938. It is a narrow, somewhat hazardous bridge that has been little modified throughout the years except for routine maintenance. The triple span bridge is 134-feet long and 29-foot wide with two 10-foot wide travel lanes, and consists of steel girders, a laminated timber deck, and an asphalt surface. The bridge is supported by two unreinforced masonry/cobble abutments and two unreinforced instream piers.

Why replace the bridge?

In 1992, the bridge was inspected and determined to be critically deficient, but was allowed to remain in service at a reduced load limit of 9-tons. In 1993, a scour hole was discovered under one of the piers during a subsurface investigation. In 1996, an environmental assessment was released detailing the removal and replacement of the South Fork Bridge. A Finding of No Significant Impact was signed and the design phase for the project was underway. Then in January of 1997, flood waters caused additional scour and undermining which elevated the safety concerns. As a result, the bridge was closed in 1998 after a temporary bypass bridge was installed to serve as an interim fix. This temporary bypass bridge has served beyond its original intent and is creating a visual intrusion on an otherwise popular scenic location.

A 1999 lawsuit on the El Portal Road Improvements Project resulted in halting the plans to remove the South Fork Bridge until completion of an approved comprehensive management plan for the Merced Wild and Scenic River. A Record of Decision on the *Merced Wild and Scenic River Comprehensive Management Plan* was signed in August 2000 and revised in November 2000.

What are the key resource concerns?

The bridge piers and abutments are currently obstructing flow on a Wild and Scenic River. The proposed single span structure would improve the free-flowing condition on the South Fork of the Merced River. Hydrologists and biologists are further studying the potential effects of this bridge replacement on the overall hydrologic processes of the river and its aquatic communities. Although the project is not likely to adversely affect any special-status species, the new environmental assessment will incorporate information based on consultation with the U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service.

The cultural values of the surrounding area are significant since Wawona is the first "developed" area in Yosemite National Park. The South Fork Bridge is located within the Wawona Archeological District and is near popular sites such as the Wawona Hotel and Pioneer Yosemite History Center. Visitors to this area enjoy golfing, photography, fishing, swimming, and learning about Wawona's significance in the creation of Yosemite National Park.

What is the current status of this project?

An environmental assessment was released to the public in April 2003, followed by a 30-day public comment period. The National Park Service is currently in the process of analyzing all of the public comments.

TIMELINE

Public scoping in preparation for the Environmental Assessment:
Fall 2002

Public comment period for the Environmental Assessment:
Spring 2003

If approved, demolition of the existing bridge begins:
Fall 2003

Replacement bridge completed:
End of 2004

Scour at the South Fork Bridge wingwall/abutment and the steel framing above of the temporary bypass bridge.

When will removal occur?

The proposed action will eliminate an immediate safety hazard and negative impacts to the free-flowing character of the South Fork of the Merced River. If approved, demolition on the condemned bridge would begin during the months of low river flows in the fall of 2003, pending approval of the project. It is anticipated that the replacement bridge would be in place by the end of 2004. Once the replacement bridge is in place, the temporary bridge will be removed.

How can the public remain involved?

Public participation in the planning process is critical. Here are some ways to stay involved in the Replace South Fork Bridge Project:

- Add your name to the Planning Mailing List to receive the *Planning Update* newsletter, as well as other planning-related announcements.
- Attend a National Park Service open house, regularly held in the Yosemite Valley Visitor Center East Auditorium. Check the park's planning web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning/ for a schedule of dates and times.
- For more information on this and other Yosemite National Park projects, visit the park's planning web site at www.nps.gov/yose/planning/.

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